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ABSTRACT

A project was conducted for the following purposes: (1) to determine reading methods and practices specific to the father's role in family literacy through research in the field of reading; (2) to develop a curriculum incorporating this research; (3) to implement this curriculum with two groups of educationally disadvantaged fathers; and (4) to compile and print a student workbook and teacher's guide to distribute in Pennsylvania. A literature review pointed to the influence of families in the school success of their children, especially through early reading, language, and drawing activities. Most of the literature documented mother-child relationships, but a few studies showed higher reading achievement by boys whose fathers read to them. A curriculum focusing on literacy classes for young fathers and their children was developed and piloted in a class of nine teen fathers and a class of older fathers in a correctional institution. The program was successful in both cases, but achieved better results with the older men. However, no children were able to participate in either group. Replication of the program is planned for future classes with both fathers and children. (Contains 34 references.) (KC)

Where are the Fathers in Family Literacy?

Final Report

Project #98-1032
Pennsylvania Department of Education

by
Beverly Martin

Northampton Community College

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Contents

I. Introduction

As educators have come to recognize the vital role of parents in initiating and perpetuating the educational legacy of future generations, and, consequently, of influencing the ability of our children to meet the more complex demands of a changing society as independent, contributing citizens, family literacy has gained a place in the forefront of adult literacy instruction. Children whose heritage includes educationally and economically disadvantaged parentage, have, as a whole, irrefutably been placed at an educational disadvantage. It is widely believed that children who have literate parents who place a high value on education and literacy skills have a distinct advantage over their counterparts whose environment is devoid of such values and role models. Family literacy programs represent an attempt to break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty and inject a sense of hope and possibility in children and parents alike.

Among the wide variety of family literacy programs that exist across the U.S., we have found few that specifically address the role of fathers. We felt that disadvantaged fathers would be an important yet challenging audience to reach through this project, given the social pressures and long-standing stigmas that negatively influence fathers' perceptions of themselves as nurturing teachers of their sons and daughters.

Our objectives in the design of this project were to 1) determine reading methods and practices specific to the father's role in family literacy through research in the field of reading, 2) to develop a curriculum incorporating this research, 3) to implement this curriculum with two groups of educationally disadvantaged fathers, and 4) to compile and print a student workbook and teacher's manual to be distributed through the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

It is the hope of all who participated in the design and implementation of this project that it will prove useful to other institutions and agencies in the Commonwealth who provide family literacy programs to members of their communities.

The writer would like to acknowledge the significant contributions of several staff members of the Adult Literacy Department of Northampton Community College: Judith Rance-Roney, former Director of Adult Literacy, who conceived the idea and proposed the grant, Eleanora Bell, Acting Director of Adult Literacy, who coordinated the project and provided invaluable insights to the writer, Pat Ojeda, who instructed the pilot class, and those who participated in the roundtable discussion to contribute their ideas and experiences in the area of Family Literacy: Judith Rance-Roney, Eleanora Bell, Nancy Trautman, reading instructor at Northampton Community College; Twila Evans, Education Director at Northampton County Prison, Dan Partin of the Pennsylvania Department of

Education, and Shawn Wright of the Center for Humanistic Change.

Copies of this report and its companion curriculum are available to all interested parties through The Pennsylvania Adult Basic and Literacy Education Division's AdvancE office, 33 Market Street, Harrisburg, Pa 17126-0333.

II. A Climate of Literacy in the Home

No one disputes the effect that a quality education can have on the future opportunities open to a child. A strong and direct correlation exists between the level of academic achievement realized and career success. More and more frequently, however, we have seen evidence that the quality education so essential to unleash a child's potential must blossom and be nurtured in the home. Ask any teacher of primary grade children what one factor contributes to early success in school, and s/he is likely to cite home environment. At no time in a child's life is this home support more critical than at the preschool age through the first few years of schooling, when the child begins to explore the use of language and the seeds of emergent literacy are sown. If language is a valued and integral component in that child's world, that is, if s/he is surrounded with opportunities to speak, listen, hear stories, see pictures and words, draw, and explore the fundamentals of written language, chances for success in school are enhanced. If, however, that same child rarely has the opportunity to speak or ask questions, is not spoken to or listened to, does not hear stories or see evidence of written language in his/her environment, is not provided with paper and writing implements and encouraged to create and illustrate little stories, that same potential for future success is impeded. Once suppressed, this potential surfaces with much

greater difficulty as the optimal time passes and the child ages.

This bring us to the crux of the problem. Educators of children are in general agreement that to maximize each child's potential, they must look beyond that child to the primary caregivers in the home. The parents or guardians must be made cognizant of the critical role they play in the education of their children. It is not enough to say, "let the schools do it-it's their job", or "that's what we pay teachers for". They must incorporate the literacy and future achievement of their children into the realm of parental responsibility and begin to view themselves as a partner in their cognitive development.

Many parents, having themselves been the recipients of a quality education which contributed to their success as adults, willingly and even zealously, accept this responsibility. They are aware of the importance of providing their children with a background of experiences that will facilitate their entry into the academic world. They talk to their children, allow them to ask questions, read to them frequently, take them to the library, buy them books to be read, reread, and cherished, encourage their rudimentary scribbles and other attempts to communicate the written language. They also take them on trips, to movies and plays, encourage social interaction with other children, and other excursions to allow them to explore the world around them. They read newspapers and books, openly discuss

current events, and let their children know that they place a high value on learning and on literacy.

But what of the parents who lack the educational background and economic means to provide their children with an idyllic home environment that will adequately prepare them for the future rigors of school? Will their children be destined to have one strike against them before they even enter the doors of their neighborhood public school? This could indeed be the case, were it not for the efforts of community-based programs in adult and family literacy.

In April of 1991, President Bush and the National Governor's Association outlined six educational goals that we as a nation should strive to achieve by the year 2000. One of these goals is that every child should start school ready to learn. Although the implications of this goal are broad and subject to numerous interpretations, we can logically conclude that part of our responsibility to educate our future citizens encompasses a need to provide the tools in the home environment that will prepare children for their formal education. This may include providing social services, health care, economic support, and certainly, educational opportunities for their parents.

A second of our six national goals addresses more directly the need for programs in adult literacy. It states that by the year 2000, every adult American shall be literate - a sobering challenge to adult literacy educators in view of the statistics that suggest that one in five adults in the

U.S. is unable to reador cannot read well enough to function as a productive member of society due to educational or economic disadvantages, or perhaps to their language-minority background.

It is these parents who are the target audience for family literacy programs that represent a true effort at partnership in education; a partnership that includes linkages with community services and organizations, businesses, and the public school systems. The outcome of such programs will be yet another partnership; that of parent and child, learning together and fortifying the bonds that remain the substance of our nation: the family.

III. Parental Influence and Literacy Achievement in Children

The aforementioned literacy experiences that are imbedded in a child's home environment and that are a function of parent-child relationships have been demonstrated through research to have a significant effect on literacy attainment and school success. Our public school systems make definite assumptions concerning the prior knowledge and realm of experiences that a child brings to school when s/he begins kindergarten (Heath, 1983). The cumulative effect of these experiences is to make the transition to formal education a smooth and natural one, with classroom experiences representing a familiar outgrowth of life at home. In children whose parents are economically, educationally, linguistically, socially, or culturally disadvantaged, the home environment is less likely to include these events. For these children, entry into formal education represents a departure from the world to which they're accustomed. Their new environment is foreign and unnatural, and they're ill-prepared for it (Chall and Snow, 1982; Heath, 1983). This disparity in the preparedness of youngsters to enter an academic climate places them at an early disadvantage that is difficult for teachers to overcome. More often than not, the between these two groups of children widens as they age, in spite of the school system's efforts to bridge it.

Evidence abounds that relates school achievement to

the educational background of the parents, and the degree to which the parents, particularly the mother, model the reading process in the home (Hewison and Tizard, 1980; Morrow, 1983; U.S. Department of Defense, 1984). There is a perception that is transmitted nonverbally that reading is an important act, when children view their parent engaged in such leisure activities as reading newspapers, books, and magazines. Even such passive role modeling can positively influence children, who will begin to copy what the adults are doing and show a desire to learn to read. When modeling and involvement become more active and direct, the results can be even more dramatic. It is not only the field of literacy acquisition that is positively influenced by the presence of resource materials in the home, but also, apparently, mathematics. In a recent report (June, 1991) of the National Center for Educational Statistics on the state of mathematics achievement, it is stated that "students in homes with resource materials such as newspapers, magazines, and books had higher mathematics proficiency, as did students who read more pages each day for school and homework. Those students with access to fewer of these materials had lower average proficiency". Perhaps this implied correlation is indirect, and the higher math proficiency is more causally related to the socioeconomic status of the family, or the level of education of the parents, which in turn is related to the number of reference materials in the home. Nonetheless, further investigation into the relationship between

mathematics and literacy achievement is warranted.

There have been many studies that support the thesis that reading aloud to children and listening to them read can produce a clear and measurable gain in reading achievement (Silvern, 1985; Bayliss, 1985; Breiling, 1976). When parents discuss stories after reading with their children and allow them to ask and answer questions about what was read, the desirable outcomes were intensified. Consequently, one objective of programs designed to increase the level of literacy in parents has been to simultaneously heighten their awareness of the critical role that they play as first teachers of their children. Indeed, once parents realize the impact they potentially have on their children's educations, they are generally eager to assume this responsibility, and consequently, are more motivated to learn themselves, because of the benefits to their children (Granowsky and Middleton, 1985; Goldenberg, 1984; Chavkin and Williams, 1985). However, due largely to cultural differences, there are some families who regard education as the exclusive domain of the school and are reluctant to "interfere". Such parental attitudes must be addressed through the structure of adult and family literacy instruction.

IV. Family Dynamics and Literacy Development

Recent statistics regarding the composition of the American family portray us as a diverse nation in a state of flux. Carlson (1990) states that the "family in America-black, white, Hispanic, and Asian-is actually in the throes of a basic upheaval". To support this contention, he cites three factors related to the social context of a child that are likely to affect his/her school achievement: (1) the increase in single parent families, (2) the employment of both parents outside the home in the traditional two-parent family, and (3) the high divorce rate, which suggests that well over half of babies born today will reside in single parent households by the age of eighteen.

By virtue of these circumstances, limitations are imposed on the amount of time available for parents to spend with children due to physical separation, fatigue, economic worries, social pressure, etc., reading to them and providing educational support is not often a top priority. In some of these families, economic circumstances prevent them from buying reading material for the home.

The influx of non-native speaking families into American culture has significant potential impact into the design and implementation of family literacy programs. Children who do not have the opportunity to communicate in English at home, yet are immersed in it at school are frequently at a high risk of academic failure. Demographic

trend studies show that this population will continue to grow exhibit a greater need for multigenerational opportunities to develop skills in reading and writing English.

Staggering statistics on poverty and single parent families suggest a long and challenging task for family literacy educators. About 30% of all young families live below the poverty level. Many of them are headed by a single parent, most often an undereducated young woman with no high school diploma who reads below the sixth grade level.

The mother's role in literacy development has been well-established in literature (Kirsch, 1986; Sticht, 1988, 1989, U. S. Department of Defense, 1984). Her influence over her children's cognitive growth can be attributed largely to her dominating presence in the home and role as primary caregiver. There have been many programs that have specifically targeted the low-literate mother, providing parenting skills, literacy instruction, and pairing them with their children in an effort to transfer these skills and effect positive change.

Surveys involving families of various cultural, educational, economic and linguistic backgrounds suggest that most recognize and accept their important role in their children's educational achievement and have a desire to provide a conducive home environment to support educational growth (Miller, 1986; Burkett, 1982; Goldenberg, 1984; Chavkin and Williams, 1985). However, the aforementioned parents affected by poverty, illiteracy, and language

barriers themselves, may lack the self-confidence, or be embarrassed by their own lack or skills, or be too intimidated by our system of education, to become influential role models for their children's success. Family literacy curricula, teaching strategies, and educators must become sensitized to the real concerns of these families, who are loving and well-intentioned, but lack the self-esteem to undertake literacy instruction in the home. Instruction in literacy must include counseling to incorporate a redefinition of attitudes concerning parental roles and a belief in oneself as a valuable asset in the intellectual growth of one's children.

In the next chapter, we will examine the role of the father in the family unit as a role model for literacy development in his children. For the sake of expediency, we will use the term "father" to refer to the dominant male figure in the family. This may include step-fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and any male with which the child has formed a close personal relationship, whether he resides in the home or merely spends time with the child on a regular basis.

V. Male Role Models and Family Literacy

An survey of the research of the role of the male in family literacy yields disappointing results. As a result of educational statistics which heavily favor the significance of the maternal effect on the educational outcome of the children, coupled with family demographics which show significant numbers of households headed by single female parents, and further supported by traditional societal attitudes which uphold the standard of the mother as nurturer, caregiver, and teacher; researchers, curriculum developers and educators have structured programs, targeted audiences, and evaluated results based largely on mother-child interactions in a family literacy context. The inattention to the male role in family literacy has not been due to oversight, but rather points to a lack of father figures in U.S. families, particularly in the disadvantaged families referred to earlier.

However, there does exist research to suggest that when male role models are present, the impact they potentially have on the educational development of their children, particularly their sons, is significant. In a comparison of academic achievement in single parent households versus traditional nuclear families, the presence of the father in the home was found to be the one factor that resulted in a statistically higher degree of educational success. Even in homes where no males reside, there is

frequently a father who has regular visitations with his children, and needs and desires to play an active role in their development. This male should be regarded as a largely untapped resource in family literacy. We as providers, can offer him opportunities to foster his own literacy growth along with that of his children, to increase his ability to form a strong and lastly bond with them, and to recognize himself as equally capable as a woman to become a partner in their education, and plant the seeds for life success. Many fathers have yet undertaken this responsibility, particularly those who do not reside with their children and have very traditional male-female role attitudes in place. It is the challenge of this project to incorporate strategies that will effect a change in the way these men view themselves as fathers. Typically, an exploration of their own educational background reveals an absence of a male role model in their literacy development. Teaching was left to mothers, grandmothers, and later, to female schoolteachers, thus perpetuating the stereotypical view of reading as a feminine activity.

In the following chapter, we will discuss the effect of gender on literacy attainment, and further explore how fathers can be partners in their children's success.

VI. Gender Differences and Literacy

It has long been noted in classroom settings that boys seem to generally have more difficulty mastering the reading process than girls. Researchers have attempted to link this observation to various genetic and environmental factors, hoping to establish a causal relationship. However, there remains no clear-cut support for one factor to the exclusion of others.

One interesting theory in the gap in achievement between the sexes is that the personalities of girls are more suited to expected classroom behavior and that there is a cultural perception of reading as a feminine activity (Johnson and Greenbaum, 1980). In cross-cultural studies, it was found that in countries such as Germany, Israel, Denmark, and Japan, where reading is viewed as a masculine activity, boys learned to read either as fast or faster than their female counterparts (Froese and Straw, 1981; Gross, 1978). These cross-cultural studies seem to suggest that physiological and genetic explanations are not as plausible as environmental ones, or that there exists a complex network of reasons rather than a single one.

Other research has produced equally interesting results. Boys seemed to comprehend high interest reading material much more successfully than low interest material (Asher and Markell, 1974). Likewise, they seemed to profit from a self-paced program with varied activities,

manipulatives, and self-selected materials (MacNeil, 1964).

The findings above have implications to teachers and developers of curricula for family literacy involving males of both generations. But perhaps the most significant finding showed that when fathers read to their sons, the achievement level in early elementary years is superior to that of boys whose mothers read to them (Laosa, 1982).

Research in gender distinctions overall supports a case for the involvement of a male role model in the family literacy process. The perception of reading as a feminine activity is one that is transmitted nonverbally from parent to child by example. Children enter school at the age of five or six with their concept of gender roles already in place. Too often the concept is incorrect, and is reinforced in the classroom which is the domain of a largely female population of teachers. This perception must be replaced with one that recognizes literacy as a skill equally necessary to both genders.

When sons and daughters participate in a family literacy program with their fathers, the stereotype is no longer perpetuated. Children enter a climate in which literacy is viewed as a family activity, a way of communicating and learning more about the world around them, regardless of their gender.

VII. Materials for a "Fathers in Literacy" Curriculum

A main objective in the design of a curriculum that emphasized the role of the male parent in creating a climate of literacy in the family was to create a program that was distinctive from others in the realm of family literacy, yet maintain the essence and integrity of what has been shown to work in such model designs. We also wished to transmit a philosophy that male role models are critical in child development, and that male literacy models can be a strong, positive influence in a child's life.

We recognize the fact that a critical component of such a program must include modeling and counseling for fathers and other male family members in the essentials of child care, nurturing techniques, and the elimination of gender-based stereotypes that minimize the male role as caregiver and educator. Thus, parenting skills for men are an essential prerequisite to family literacy activities, or at least should be taught in tandem. This knowledge provides an excellent opportunity for the family literacy provider to establish a partnership with a community service organization in a teamwork approach to family counseling and literacy.

Research has provided little information on specific pedagogical techniques that can be applied to the development

of a curriculum for fathers. We have every reason to believe that males can benefit from the same type of sound instructional practices that have proven effective in other literacy programs. There are, however, some guidelines regarding the structure of the class and the selection of materials that might be incorporated to create a program that is appealing to a male population.

All students respond better to reading materials that are of high interest to them. This may be especially true in the case of males (Asher and Markell, 1974), who may also demonstrate a need for more autonomy in the selection of their own materials. Teachers of family literacy programs should allow fathers and children freedom to choose what they like to read, and be sure to have a wide range of materials available. The use of Language Experience stories, in which fathers and children create and read their own stories based on individual interests, can be a valuable instructional strategy in such a program.

Materials to be used in literacy programs should not be limited to books and periodicals. Common household items provide abundant opportunities to practice skills in an informal, non-threatening environment that represents a departure from a classroom-like setting. Instructions for playing games, labels from household items, newsletters, hobby magazines, brochures, pamphlets, maps, toys, video games, and other realia from the home, can provide the motivation and stimuli for interactive literacy activities.

There is some evidence to suggest that males can be positively affected by the inclusion of action-oriented, gross motor activities and non-traditional, hands-on materials. Computers, video and audio equipment, role-playing and game playing, athletic activities, toys and hobbies, can be put to creative application to reinforce literacy skills and provide an enjoyable, shared experience for fathers and their children.

Although our focus has been on the male role in the family and as a partner in family literacy, we must not neglect the role women in this curriculum. We have already discussed the need to change attitudes to reduce stereotypical images of male-female roles. We must bear in mind that the sons and daughters of the fathers that we target in this program will need an enlightened view of their gender roles in a changing society. The stories, books, and other instructional materials that are used should provide positive, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic examples of both males and females in a variety of settings.

Providers of family literacy programs have the unique opportunity to infuse both educational and social values into the mainstay of American society: the family unit. In the U.S., families are characterized by their diverse composition and unique backgrounds. This project has attempted to address but one component of the complex problem of illiteracy and its self-perpetuation in our young people. That component is the male role model as a vehicle for literacy acquisition.

VIII. Report on Pilot Class

In accordance with the guidelines set forth in the grant proposal for the program "Where Are the Fathers in Family Literacy?", two classes were taught using the curriculum as it was in the developing process. Although these classes both represented a departure from the "normal" family literacy population, the curriculum was well-received by the students, and some attitudinal improvements were noted.

The first class consisted of nine young men in their late teens who participated as part of the Youth Corps program of the Private Industry Council. Although these boys were still teens, they were also young fathers. The class met for a total of four hours per week for sixteen weeks. Although their instructor, Pat Ojea, noted an overall positive reception of the course materials and activities, she also noted some problems with the use of the curriculum with this particular population of fathers.

On the encouraging side, the boys enjoyed and profited from many of the instructional activities in the program. They especially liked reading aloud, taping language experience stories related to their background experiences, and exploring their roots.

However, the instructor noted that, due to their ages and level of maturity, a heavier focus on practical aspects of positive parenting would have been appropriate. These boys lacked male role models in their own lives, and could have

benefited from taking this course with their own fathers. In other words, these young fathers still need parenting themselves, and in some cases, were not emotionally prepared to accept their responsibilities as parents.

At the conclusion of the course, some attitudinal improvements were documented through discussion and through the results of the exit survey that was taken.

The second pilot class proved very successful. The population was composed of inmates at the Northampton County Prison. The fathers ranged in age from 21 to 36 years old, and participated in the sixteen-week class for approximately four hours per week. They enjoyed the variety of activities and found they could be successful participants in most, regardless of their entry-level literacy skills. Improvements were seen in both their skills, and in their acceptance of themselves as potential literacy role models to their children.

In both pilot classes, the major drawback was that children were unable to participate in the curriculum with their fathers. There are plans to replicate this program with future classes that will include both fathers and children, for true intergenerational benefits. It is believed that the potentially beneficial effects of this curriculum that have been outlined in this paper will be greatly enhanced under these conditions.

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